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## Book Review: *The Good War's Greatest Hits - World War II And American Remembering*

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### Abstract

Book review of *The Good War's Greatest Hits: World War II and American Remembering*, by Philip D. Beidler.

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*The Good War's Greatest Hits: World War II and American Remembering.* By Philip D. Beidler. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998. Preface, acknowledgments, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Pp. x, 220. \$29.95.)

Today, over fifty years since the World War II era, America's collective memory has come to rely on historical popular culture in recalling the past. Philip D. Beidler, professor of English at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, contributes an analysis of this relationship among American memory, the past, and cultural landmarks in his recent work, *The Good War's Greatest Hits: World War II and American Remembering*. In previous scholarship, Beidler has examined mythmaking and memory as it pertains to literature and the past, particularly during the Vietnam era. In his latest work, however, Beidler steps back two decades and two wars and submits this completely different time to a cultural interpretation.

While Beidler admits in his preface that he lacks an overarching thesis that correlates memory and popular culture, he does advance significant themes in his subsequent four chapters. In chapter 1, titled "The Good War's Greatest Hits," Beidler attributes today's legendary aura surrounding World War II to American packaging and preservation of this "legend" in the popular culture created during the early post-1945 period. Beidler contends that Americans have understood the war through what he calls "American remembering"—a continual process of combining the past and memory that eventually produces popular culture war icons. In order to understand the formation of America's collective memory, Beidler proposes to examine the production processes of his hand-selected cultural forms including, among other media, film, literature, photography, and Broadway theater.

Beidler's introductory chapter easily sets up the next two chapters, which are the heart of his work. In "Making a Production Out of It," the author briefly surveys the enormous cultural literature of the postwar era and selects his "canon" of icons: *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Mister Roberts*, *South Pacific*, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Life's Picture History of World War II*, and *Victory at Sea*. Beidler implicitly argues that these popular texts reflect "American remembering" of the war and show the "commodification of the American role in World War II as at once felt experience and collective myth." Unfortunately, Beidler does not delineate his selection criteria, so one is left to believe that he chose these examples expressly to support his chapter thesis. The author's section about *Life's Picture History of World War II*, nevertheless, is his most cogent and complete narrative and analysis in this chapter. In other sections, though, Beidler too often indulges in production description and does not connect his thematic points to the narrative.

Chapter 3, "Big War, Big Book, Big Movie," follows the same organizational pattern as the previous chapter. Beidler proposes the theme that World War II, as a "big war," generated equally popular literature that often resulted in comparatively successful films. He identifies *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Young Lions*, *From Here to Eternity*, *The Caine*

*Mutiny*, and *Battle Cry* as examples that fit his theory. As in chapter 2, Beidler provides detailed narratives though sometimes sketchy analyses and incomplete connections to his previous chapter.

His last chapter, "The Good War and The Great SNAFU," cites two films, *The Longest Day* and *Catch-22*, both as initiators of the "Greatest Hits" legacies and as opposing genres. Beidler labels *The Longest Day* as commemorative and nostalgic; *Catch-22* he cites as satirical, often resulting in self-parody. Ultimately, however, the author concludes that by the late 1960s, both genres portrayed the same self-parody of the "great" war.

Although Beidler's interpretation of World War II popular culture icons provides an interesting read, in certain areas his work is problematic. In the first place, he addresses a unique audience. Beidler states in his preface that he writes for readers generally interested in cultural myth, and he provides more detailed information and analysis in his content notes for interested readers, though still not for academic audiences. His book's collegiate language and abstract subject matter, though, would prevent many nonacademic audiences from reading it. Secondly, historians would probably prefer a comprehensive thesis, more consistent analysis, and clearer selection criteria. More historically relevant content notes would also greatly enhance Beidler's analysis. For the specific audience Beidler addresses, *The Good War's Greatest Hits* can be useful. For more serious readers, though, the book can only provide general information about World War II mythmaking amidst a critical and rapidly developing literature concerning history and memory.

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